IREELL
Indonesian Review of English Education, Linguistics, and Literature
P-ISSN: 3025-2369 **I** E-ISSN: 3021-8101
https://jurnalfaktarbiyah.iainkediri.ac.id/index.php/ireel/index

Inclusive English Language Pedagogies for Learners with Disabilities across Various Contexts: A Systematic Literature Review

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ABSTRACT

As educational paradigms shift toward inclusive practices, supporting learners with disabilities in English as a Second Language (ESL) education remains a global challenge. This systematic literature review aims to examine the global demographic representation of learners with disabilities and identify effective instructional methodologies. Guided by the PRISMA 2020 framework, among 1,211 initial articles from SAGE, Taylor & Francis, Google Scholar, and ScienceDirect, the study ultimately synthesized 14 peer-reviewed empirical articles (2022–2026) meeting the inclusion criteria of focusing on ESL pedagogy and specific disability classifications. The findings revealed that learners with literacy-related disabilities, particularly dyslexia and reading difficulties, were the most frequently represented population, while autistic learners (four studies) and learners who are deaf or hard of hearing, have physical disabilities, or carry intersectional labels (two studies each) were less frequently represented. The literature was concentrated primarily in the United States and selected Asian and European contexts, with higher education emerging as the dominant educational setting. In terms of pedagogy, translanguaging practices, multimodal and visual scaffolding, Universal Design for Learning (UDL), and structured literacy instruction were the most frequently reported approaches, although reporting frequency does not establish comparative effectiveness. Overall, the findings indicate a growing shift from deficit-oriented perspectives toward more inclusive, multilingual, and accessibility-centered approaches in ESL education for learners with disabilities. These findings hold significant implications for curriculum designers, highlighting the need to integrate disability-inclusive frameworks into language teacher preparation globally.

Keywords: disability-inclusive ESL, multimodal scaffolding, systematic literature review, translanguaging pedagogy, Universal Design for Learning

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Introduction

In the field of applied linguistics and language teacher education, there has been a profound, ongoing paradigm shift away from traditional, deficit-oriented frameworks that view linguistic and cognitive diversities as developmental shortcomings (Kulkarni et al., 2024). For decades, the intersection of second language acquisition and special education has been constrained by institutional structures that evaluate minoritized learners against rigid, monolingual, and neurotypical standards (Hallaran et al., 2025). This institutional bias often reduces a learner's complex communicative repertoire to a list of clinical diagnoses, creating environments that actively foster psycho-emotional alienation and systemic exclusion within language classrooms (Maher & Haegele, 2024; Sarkar, 2025). In response, contemporary TESOL scholarship calls for a definitive transition toward asset-based models. These perspectives argue that meaningful inclusion can only be achieved when institutions dismantle ableist assumptions and actively implement disability-centered, culturally sustaining pedagogies that honor the unique lived experiences of every student (Boveda, 2025; Kulkarni et al., 2024).

Despite these evolving theoretical conversations, an enduring challenge in daily educational practice often involves an administrative and conceptual gap between English language teaching programs and special education departments. Rather than operating within a collaborative framework, language teachers and special educators are frequently forced into isolated professional spheres, leaving them to navigate the overlapping complexities of race, language proficiency, and disability labels without cohesive structural support (Hallaran et al., 2025). This lack of systemic cohesion creates a problematic gap in classroom execution. As a result, language practitioners often find themselves struggling to balance flexible linguistic practices with rigid institutional accommodations for emergent multilinguals who carry disability labels (Padía et al., 2024). When classrooms lack unified pedagogical designs, vulnerable students are often left in a frustrating cycle of high academic effort that yields low institutional outcomes, restricted by systemic barriers that follow them well into secondary and higher education contexts (Abdullateef, 2023; Malinovskiy et al., 2024).

Investigating how these dynamics manifest globally is essential for designing language policies and teaching practices that are truly responsive to student needs. By looking at how different international contexts handle these educational intersections, researchers can move past Western-centric assumptions that frequently treat Global North pedagogical norms and definitions of disability as universal standards. For instance, incorporating decolonial perspectives from post-Soviet settings and analyzing capabilities-based educational policies in the Global South highlights how inclusive practices are shaped by specific historical legacies rather than imported Western models. This allows the field to explore localized models of inclusion and capabilities-based policy frameworks across diverse geographical and socio-political landscapes (Abdullayeva, 2025; Nath & Batra, 2025; Sarkar, 2025). Furthermore, analyzing the long-term impact of major global disruptions such as the sudden shift to online learning environments offers critical insights for building resilient, flexible, and accessible instructional spaces for diverse learners (Chidlow et al., 2025; Lynch et al., 2026). In this context, the integration of digital media in English language education has proven vital for creating dynamic, student-centered learning experiences that enhance engagement and comprehension (Sa'adah et al., 2026). Synthesizing this international literature provides a clearer picture of the subtle ways ableism and exclusion operate, while highlighting spaces of pedagogical success across both digital and physical learning environments (Huang, 2026; Kim & Sellmaier, 2026).

To address these empirical and institutional gaps, our systematic literature review synthesizes peer-reviewed research published between 2022 and 2026. The primary goal is to map the evolving global demographic landscapes and evaluate the instructional designs that support English language acquisition among learners with disabilities. In doing so, this study aims to highlight the diverse communicative practices and specialized approaches developed within inclusive environments, moving away from restrictive deficit assumptions (Al-motrif, 2025; Alexandra & Thomson, 2025).

The focus on mapping demographics allows us to address long-standing gaps regarding underrepresented student populations whose complex linguistic profiles are frequently overlooked in mainstream applied linguistics. For instance, exploring the multi-modal and multilingual repertoires of deaf and hard-of-hearing learners in various regional

settings (Böhringer & Storbeck, 2025; Qin, 2025). By examining these student populations through an intersectional, socio-spatial lens, our review traces how institutional settings and social environments shape educational paths and influence classroom discourse regarding disability (Jacobson & Bialka, 2023; Miller & Pearson, 2024). This demographic perspective spans multiple levels of education, contrasting structured classroom environments with higher education contexts, where researchers evaluate how faculty adapt spaces and use universal design frameworks to support neurodivergent cohorts (Barrera Ciurana & Moliner García, 2025; Zhang et al., 2025).

Concurrently, evaluating instructional efficacy helps identify actionable classroom strategies that bridge the gap between language acquisition theory and special education practices. Recent studies demonstrate that combining inclusive frameworks, like translanguaging and Universal Design for Learning (UDL), allows teachers to support students with learning differences while valuing their home languages in dense, multilingual settings (Cifre & Coblijn, 2025; Zhang et al., 2025). These targeted, multi-modal instructional designs are crucial for fostering student autonomy and independence, particularly for learners facing complex sensory or cognitive challenges (Brandt, 2024). This view is consistent with research in English education showing that visual and textual elements operate together as multimodal resources for meaning-making rather than serving merely decorative purposes (Cahyati, 2025). However, as technology evolves, it is equally important to critically assess digital spaces. While digital tools can expand access, they can also reinforce exclusion, as seen in emerging critiques of how systemic power and bias operate within generative artificial intelligence and digital writing environments (Foley & Melese, 2025; Papanastasiou et al., 2026).

This synthesis holds significant practical and theoretical value for language teachers, curriculum designers, and teacher education programs. By bringing disability studies directly into the teacher preparation curriculum, institutions can foster inclusive, asset-based attitudes among future educators before they enter the classroom (Karaer et al., 2024). Moving away from rigid, compliance-driven approaches allows schools to embrace a relational pedagogy perspective, which prioritizes supportive educational relationships over bureaucratic checking of boxes (Chinnery, 2026). Furthermore, understanding these synthesized empirical findings

helps educators recognize and counter the subtle microaggressions and institutional disablism that can quietly undermine a student's sense of belonging and academic confidence (Vlachou et al., 2026). Ultimately, this evidence helps schools overcome institutional inertia, turning high-level inclusive policies into meaningful, daily classroom practices (Karisa, 2026).

Three conceptual lenses inform the review. The Social Model of Disability locates disadvantage in the barriers created by environments and institutions rather than in individual impairment (Oliver, 1990; Shakespeare, 2006). Universal Design for Learning (UDL) proposes anticipating learner variability by offering multiple means of engagement, representation, and action and expression (CAST, 2024). Translanguaging treats learners' full linguistic repertoires as legitimate resources for meaning-making rather than as obstacles to learning English (García & Li Wei, 2014). Together, these lenses shape how the pedagogical themes reported in the included studies are read in this review.

Against this background, the review addresses two research questions. (1) What are the global demographic profiles, specifically regarding disability classifications, geographic regions, and educational contexts, of learners with disabilities most frequently explored in English as a Second Language (ESL) research from 2022 to 2026? (2) Which instructional methodologies are most frequently reported as effective for facilitating English language acquisition among these learners in the global literature from 2022 to 2026?

Methods

This study employs a systematic literature review (SLR) research design to synthesize existing empirical evidence regarding global demographics and effective pedagogical approaches in English as a second language (ESL) for learners with disabilities. To ensure a transparent and replicable process, the review was designed and executed in strict accordance with the PRISMA 2020 guidelines illustrated in Figure 1. To establish a focused, structured, and answerable inquiry, the research design operationalized the PICO framework during the initial planning phase. Within this framework, the population (P) is defined as learners with disabilities situated within ESL or TESOL educational settings. The intervention (I) encompasses the specific pedagogical approaches and classroom strategies applied by educators. The comparison (C) considers variations across diverse global demographic boundaries and institutional levels, while the outcome (O) focuses on the efficacy of these

instructional methods in facilitating English language acquisition and dismantling ableist institutional barriers. By anchoring the SLR design in these structured inquiries, the review systematically builds an empirical bridge between second language acquisition theory and inclusive special education practice.

Figure 1

Review Methodology



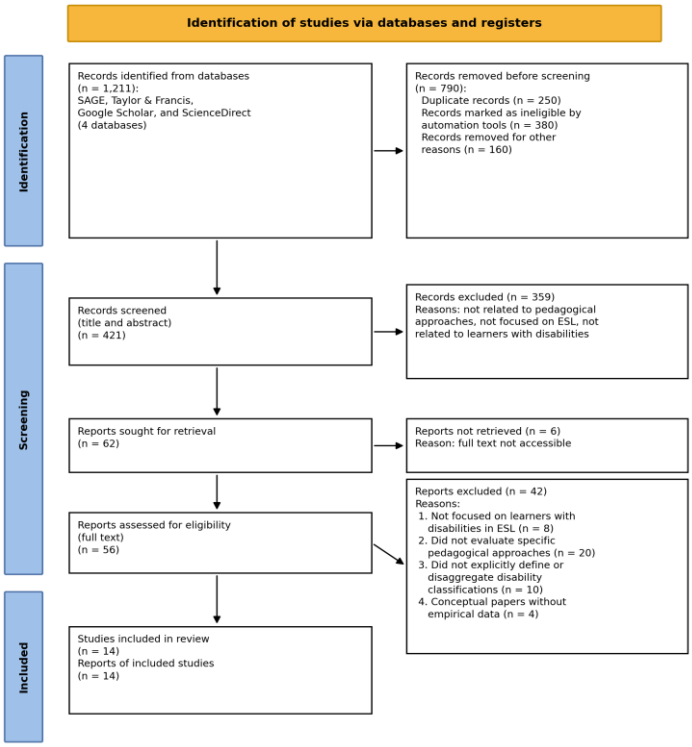
The initial literature population was identified through comprehensive electronic searches across four primary academic databases: SAGE, Taylor & Francis, Google Scholar, and ScienceDirect, yielding an aggregate initial population of 1,211 articles. The search combined Boolean terms such as ("English as a Second Language" or "ESL") and ("disabled learners" or "disability") and ("English pedagogical approaches" or "English teaching method") and was limited to peer-reviewed journal articles published between 2022 and 2026. Before formal screening, 790 articles were systematically excluded due to duplication, automated year ineligibility, or target language dissonance. Following this initial refinement, 421 articles advanced to the title and abstract screening stage, Title and abstract screening excluded 359 records, leaving 62 reports for full-text retrieval; 6 could not be retrieved, and the remaining 56 were assessed against explicit eligibility criteria, of which 42 were excluded (8 not focused on learners with disabilities in ESL, 20 not evaluating a pedagogical approach, 10 not defining or disaggregating disability classifications, and 4 conceptual papers without primary data).

The inclusion criteria required that an article be a peer-reviewed empirical study, published between 2022 and 2026, written in English, and directly investigate both an ESL pedagogical environment and a clearly disaggregated student disability classification. Conversely, the exclusion criteria specified the removal of non-ESL contexts, papers focusing

on general education without specific instructional adaptations, studies that failed to explicitly define or disaggregate the disability classifications, and conceptual papers lacking primary empirical data. Ultimately, this multi-stage filtering framework resulted in a final research sample of 14 empirical studies, as tracked in the PRISMA 2020 flow diagram in Figure 2. Study quality was appraised against criteria adapted from established systematic review standards (clarity of objectives, methodological rigor, data validity, and relevance to the research questions), and a standardized coding sheet was used to extract data from the 14 studies.

Figure 2

PRISMA 2020 Flow diagram for new Systematic Literature Review



To analyze and synthesize the data extracted from the final sample, this review utilizes qualitative thematic synthesis integrated with descriptive content analysis. In alignment with qualitative standards, the analysis is operationalized through the classic six-phase thematic analysis model established by Braun and Clarke (2006). Although this thematic framework was originally designed for analyzing primary qualitative data (such as interview transcripts), its logical progression was adapted here for secondary data synthesis; by treating the textual findings and pedagogical descriptions from the selected empirical articles as the primary data corpus, the researchers could systematically generate descriptive codes and overarching

themes. This analytical model is explicitly executed along two complementary tracks. First, descriptive content analysis compiles and calculates the frequencies of the global demographic profiles, including geographic distribution, educational levels, and specific disability classifications. Concurrently, the qualitative text describing classroom execution and instructional interventions undergoes rigorous open and axial coding within the thematic synthesis model. These codes are then synthesized into overarching, asset-based thematic models to evaluate operational execution and explain how specialized pedagogical frameworks operate across diverse geographical and digital spaces.

Result and Discussion

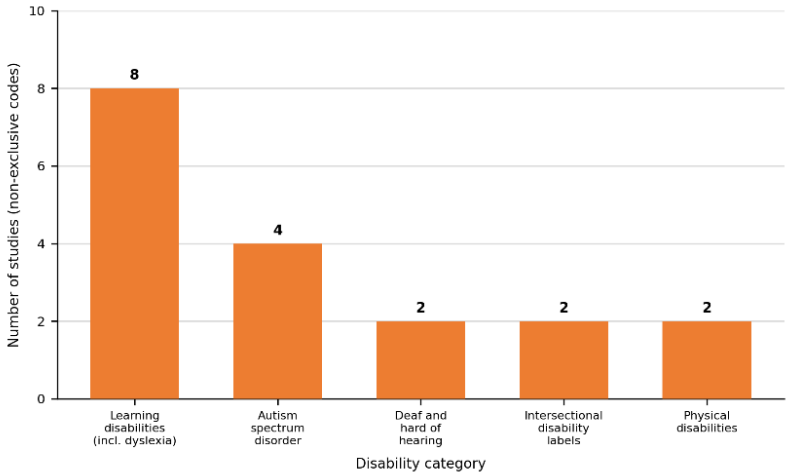
This section presents and discusses the findings from 14 screened and reviewed articles published between 2022 and 2026, focusing on the global demographic profiles of learners with disabilities and the most effective instructional methodologies in ESL contexts.

a. The Global Demographic Profiles of Learners with Disabilities Most Frequently Explored in ESL Research (2022–2026)

The coding analysis reveals a noticeable imbalance in the representation of disability categories within contemporary ESL research. As illustrated in Figure 3, learning disabilities, including dyslexia and reading difficulties, were the most frequently investigated category, appearing in 8 of the 14 reviewed studies (57.1%). These studies largely focused on decoding difficulties, reading comprehension, phonological processing, and literacy transfer across multilingual settings (Abdullateef, 2023; Cifre & Coblijn, 2025; Yeung et al., 2023; Zhang et al., 2025). In contrast, deaf and hard-of-hearing learners, intersectional multilingual disability labels, and physical disabilities each appeared in only 2 studies (14.3%), while Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) was represented in 4 studies (28.6%). Several studies examined more than one disability category, educational level, or geographic context; coding frequencies are non-mutually exclusive and may exceed the total number of included studies (18 codes across N = 14 studies). Percentages are calculated against the 14 included studies. Frequencies should therefore be interpreted as the number of studies in which each code appeared rather than as exclusive categories.

Figure 3

Distribution of Major Disability Categories in ESL Research (2022–2026)



The dominance of learning disabilities indicates that recent ESL scholarship has primarily concentrated on disability categories closely associated with literacy and language-processing difficulties. This pattern suggests that research attention continues to be shaped by academic language performance and reading-related concerns, particularly within educational systems where English proficiency is strongly connected to measurable literacy outcomes. Several studies specifically emphasized reading fluency, phonics transfer, multisensory literacy instruction, and scaffolded decoding interventions as central concerns for learners with disabilities in ESL environments (Abdullateef, 2023; Yeung et al., 2023).

The concentration on literacy-related disabilities may be associated with the central role of reading and writing in English language learning. These skills are commonly assessed through observable outcomes, including word recognition, reading fluency, and comprehension. However, the frequency of research attention should not be interpreted as evidence that learning disabilities are more prevalent than other disabilities among English learners. Paglialunga and Melogno (2025), in a systematic review of AI-based interventions for students with learning disabilities, likewise found dyslexia to be the most studied condition (six of 11 studies), although their review was restricted to learning disabilities by design. This comparison indicates that patterns of disability representation may vary according to the educational field, research objectives, and types of intervention examined.

Meanwhile, the comparatively limited representation of ASD, physical disabilities, and intersectional disability identities suggests that several learner populations remain

underrepresented in ESL scholarship. Although Barrera Ciurana and Moliner García (2025) and Alexandra and Thomson (2025) highlighted the importance of strengths-based and neurodiversity-oriented approaches for autistic learners, ASD-related ESL research still appeared substantially less visible compared to literacy-centered disability studies. Similarly, studies involving physical disabilities tended to focus more broadly on inclusion, accessibility, and participation rather than language acquisition itself (Van Hoven, 2025; Kim & Sellmaier, 2026). This imbalance suggests that ESL research may still privilege disability categories perceived as directly affecting linguistic performance while giving less attention to broader communicative and participatory experiences.

From the perspective of the Social Model of Disability (Oliver, 1990), these differences also require consideration of barriers created by educational environments rather than disability classifications alone. The limited number of studies on physical and sensory disabilities may partly reflect the review's specific focus on English language pedagogy and the requirement for clearly identified disability categories. Consequently, the distribution of the reviewed studies should be interpreted as a pattern within the selected literature, rather than a complete representation of learners with disabilities in global English education (Lynch et al., 2026).

Another important finding is the emergence of intersectional and mixed disability categorizations. Studies such as Hallaran et al. (2025) and Padía et al. (2024) moved beyond singular disability labels by examining emergent bilingual learners positioned simultaneously within linguistic, racial, and disability-related marginalization. Rather than treating disability as an isolated medical condition, these studies framed learner identities as socially and institutionally constructed through overlapping systems of exclusion. This shift reflects a growing movement in inclusive ESL scholarship toward more multidimensional understandings of learner diversity and away from strictly deficit-oriented classifications (Hallaran et al., 2025; Padía et al., 2024).

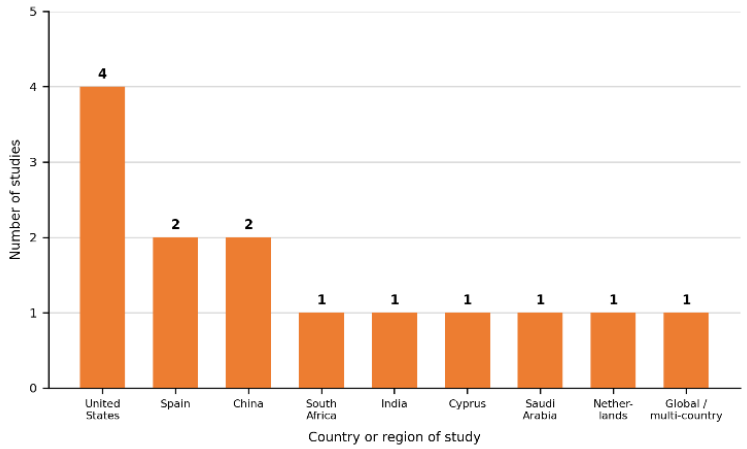
This interpretation is consistent with disability-centered approaches that examine how linguistic identity, disability labels, and institutional practices interact. It also suggests that research based exclusively on single disability categories may overlook learners whose

educational experiences are shaped by several overlapping factors (Kulkarni et al., 2024; Boveda, 2025).

The geographic distribution of the reviewed studies demonstrates that ESL research on learners with disabilities remains concentrated within several dominant educational regions. As presented in Figure 4, the United States emerged as the most represented context, appearing in 4 studies, followed by Spain and China with 2 studies each. Other regions, including South Africa, India, Cyprus, Saudi Arabia, and the Netherlands, were represented by only one study respectively, while one study adopted a broader global or multi-country perspective.

Figure 4

Geographic Distribution of ESL Research on Learners with Disabilities (2022–2026)



The strong representation of the United States reflects the continued influence of Western inclusive education discourse within disability and ESL scholarship. Studies conducted in the U.S. frequently emphasized intersectionality, multilingualism, disability justice, and anti-ableist educational frameworks, particularly among emergent bilingual learners labeled as having disabilities (Hallaran et al., 2025; Padía et al., 2024). These studies tended to position disability not merely as an individual condition, but as a socially constructed experience shaped by race, language, institutional structures, and educational policy.

The concentration of studies in the United States should also be interpreted with caution, since the geographic distribution reflects the studies identified through the selected databases and inclusion criteria. Research visibility may be influenced by publication language, differences in terminology, and the distinction between English as a Second

Language (ESL) and English as a Foreign Language (EFL). Therefore, a higher number of included studies from one country does not necessarily indicate that inclusive English teaching is more developed there.

At the same time, the presence of studies from China, Saudi Arabia, India, and South Africa indicates a growing expansion of inclusive ESL research beyond traditionally dominant Western contexts. However, the nature of these studies often reflected localized educational concerns and language-learning priorities. For instance, research from China primarily focused on multilingual and transmodal communication practices among deaf and hard-of-hearing learners (Qin, 2025; Yeung et al., 2023), while studies from Saudi Arabia and India emphasized literacy intervention, multilingual classrooms, and structured language support for learners with reading difficulties (Abdullateef, 2023; Zhang et al., 2025).

Despite this growing international spread, representation across regions remained uneven. Only limited studies originated from African contexts, represented mainly by South Africa (Böhringer & Storbeck, 2025), while Latin America and several Southeast Asian countries remained comparatively underrepresented within the reviewed ESL literature. This imbalance may partly reflect differences in linguistic classifications and research traditions, as many countries in these regions are more commonly positioned within EFL (English as a Foreign Language) rather than ESL contexts. Consequently, relevant disability-inclusive English learning research from these regions may be categorized under different educational and linguistic frameworks.

Another important pattern concerns the dominance of nation-specific studies over broader comparative investigations. Most reviewed articles focused on localized educational realities rather than cross-national analyses, indicating that inclusive ESL practices continue to be heavily influenced by contextual policy environments, linguistic ecologies, and sociocultural understandings of disability. Consequently, while the literature demonstrates increasing global engagement with disability-inclusive ESL education, the field still lacks substantial comparative scholarship capable of capturing broader transnational patterns and inequalities.

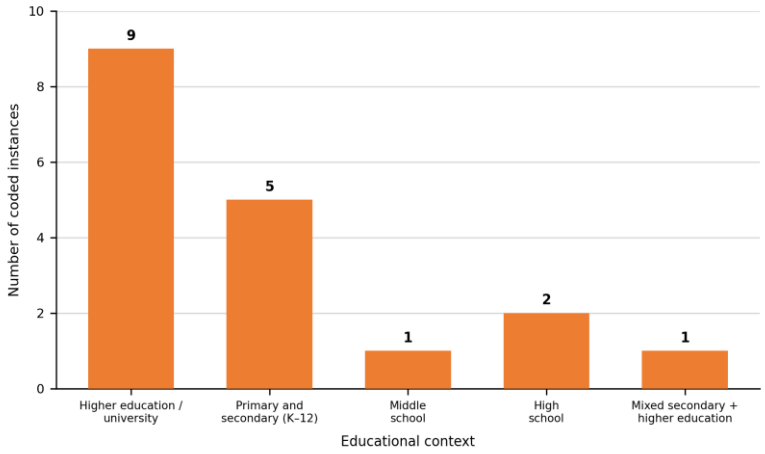
These findings indicate a need for cross-country research that examines how differences in educational policy, language status, teacher preparation, and access to support

services shape inclusive practices. Such comparisons would help distinguish pedagogical strategies that are transferable across contexts from those that depend on local institutional conditions (Nath & Batra, 2025; Sarkar, 2025).

In the educational context, the coding analysis shows that higher education and university settings were the most frequently represented educational contexts in the reviewed ESL literature. As illustrated in Figure 5, higher education appeared in 9 coded instances, followed by primary and secondary education (K–12) with 5 instances. In comparison, middle school and mixed secondary–higher education contexts appeared only once, while high school settings were represented in 2 studies. Because several studies examined multiple educational levels simultaneously, the coding frequencies are non-mutually exclusive and therefore exceed the total number of reviewed articles (N = 14).

Figure 5

Educational Contexts in ESL Research on Learners with Disabilities (2022–2026)



The predominance of higher education contexts suggests that contemporary ESL and disability scholarship has increasingly shifted toward issues of accessibility, participation, and inclusion within universities and postsecondary institutions. Many studies examined how learners with disabilities navigate academic communication, multilingual learning demands, and institutional barriers in higher education environments (Barrera Ciurana & Moliner García, 2025; Kim & Sellmaier, 2026; Papanastasiou et al., 2026). These studies frequently emphasized inclusive pedagogical design, digital accessibility, flexible assessment practices, and learner autonomy as central concerns within university-level ESL and multilingual settings.

This trend may also reflect the growing international pressure on universities to implement inclusive education policies and equitable learning frameworks. Several studies highlighted how higher education institutions increasingly adopt Universal Design for Learning (UDL), multimodal instruction, and technology-assisted learning to accommodate diverse learner needs (Chidlow et al., 2025; S. Huang, 2025). However, despite these developments, the literature also revealed persistent structural barriers, including institutional ableism, limited lecturer preparedness, and inconsistent implementation of inclusive policies (Hallaran et al., 2025).

A further interpretation is that university research often places particular attention on accessibility, student independence, and formal accommodation practices. Lynch et al. (2026) found that the flexibility of online higher education can improve educational access for students with disabilities, while inadequate support, repeated disclosure requirements, and social stigma continue to limit their participation. These findings provide a wider educational context for understanding the attention given to postsecondary inclusion in the present review. However, they do not establish that these factors caused the higher number of university studies in the selected ESL corpus.

In comparison, studies situated within primary and secondary education contexts were less dominant but tended to focus more directly on foundational language acquisition, literacy intervention, classroom participation, and inclusive instructional support. Research involving younger learners frequently examined multilingual classrooms, reading interventions, phonics instruction, translanguaging practices, and multimodal scaffolding strategies for students with learning disabilities or sensory impairments (Böhringer & Storbeck, 2025; Yeung et al., 2023; Zhang et al., 2025). These studies often positioned inclusive pedagogy as closely connected to early educational intervention and communicative accessibility.

Another important finding is the relatively limited representation of early childhood education and specialized educational institutions within the reviewed ESL literature. Although inclusion discourse strongly emphasizes early intervention and developmental support, few studies explicitly investigated learners with disabilities in preschool or specialized ESL environments. This absence suggests that current ESL scholarship may still prioritize

formal academic settings where English proficiency is institutionally measurable and academically assessed.

b. Instructional Methodologies Supporting English Language Acquisition Among Learners with Disabilities (2022–2026)

The synthesis of the reviewed studies identified several recurring higher-order pedagogical themes used to facilitate English language acquisition among learners with disabilities. As illustrated in Table 1, three instructional themes emerged as the most frequently represented across the reviewed literature: Flexible Inclusive Frameworks, Multilingual and Translanguaging Pedagogies, and Multimodal and Visual Scaffolding, each appearing in 6 studies. These were followed by Explicit Literacy Instruction, which appeared in 5 studies, Collaborative and Participatory Learning in 4 studies, and Technology-Enhanced Instruction in 3 studies.

Table 1

Consolidated Higher-Order Themes of Teaching Techniques in ESL Research (2022–2026)

Higher-Order Theme	Included Codes	Frequency (n)
Flexible Inclusive Frameworks	UDL, RTI, differentiated instruction	6
Multilingual and Translanguaging Pedagogies	Translanguaging, bilingual-bicultural, sign language integration	6
Multimodal and Visual Scaffolding	Visual aids, recorded lectures, multimedia, AAC	6
Explicit Literacy Instruction	Phonics, repeated reading, structured writing	5
Collaborative and Participatory Learning	Team teaching, inquiry-based, arts-based pedagogy	4
Technology-Enhanced Instruction	ChatGPT, digital tools, AI-assisted writing	3

A strong pattern across the reviewed literature was the increasing emphasis on instructional flexibility and accessibility-oriented pedagogy. Flexible Inclusive Frameworks, including Universal Design for Learning (UDL), Response to Intervention (RTI), and differentiated instruction were consistently used to accommodate diverse learner needs through adaptive teaching practices and multiple forms of engagement (Brandt, 2024; S. Huang, 2025). Rather than positioning disability as an individual deficit requiring isolated

remediation, these approaches aimed to reduce structural learning barriers through proactive instructional design.

The relevance of these frameworks can be explained through Universal Design for Learning, which emphasizes the proactive removal of learning barriers by offering different ways for learners to engage with content, access information, and demonstrate understanding (CAST, 2024). Nevertheless, the presence of UDL, RTI, and differentiated instruction within the same higher-order theme should not be taken to mean that these approaches have identical purposes or levels of empirical support. Their contributions need to be considered in relation to the specific instructional needs and outcomes addressed in each study.

Similarly, Multilingual and Translanguaging Pedagogies emerged as one of the most frequently reported approaches within disability-inclusive ESL settings. Studies employing translanguaging, bilingual-bicultural practices, and sign language integration emphasized the importance of allowing learners to utilize their full linguistic repertoires during English acquisition (Böhringer & Storbeck, 2025; Padía et al., 2024; Qin, 2025). Across these studies, multilingual communication practices were positioned not as obstacles to English learning, but as valuable cognitive and communicative resources that supported participation and meaning-making.

The pedagogical value of translanguaging may be understood through its recognition of learners' existing linguistic resources as part of classroom meaning-making. For learners with disabilities, allowing more than one language or communication mode may reduce barriers created by English-only practices and provide alternative opportunities for participation. However, these benefits should not be assumed to occur in the same way across all disability groups or language-learning contexts. The findings primarily show that translanguaging was frequently discussed as a supportive approach within the reviewed studies (Padía et al., 2024; Qin, 2025).

Another dominant theme involved Multimodal and Visual Scaffolding strategies, particularly through the use of visual aids, recorded lectures, multimedia materials, and augmentative and alternative communication (AAC) systems. These approaches were frequently associated with increased comprehension and classroom accessibility for learners with sensory, cognitive, and literacy-related differences (Chidlow et al., 2025). The findings

suggest that multimodal delivery became increasingly important in ESL environments where reliance on text-heavy or auditory-centered instruction could limit learner participation.

The significance of multimodal scaffolding is also supported by wider research on disability-inclusive education. Lynch et al. (2026) found that online learning materials and accommodations may remain inaccessible when they do not meet students' actual needs. These findings suggest that providing materials in several formats is not sufficient unless those formats are usable and aligned with the learning task.

In addition to these broader accessibility-oriented approaches, Explicit Literacy Instruction remained a central methodology, particularly in studies involving dyslexia and reading-related disabilities. Structured phonics instruction, repeated reading activities, and scaffolded writing practices were commonly implemented to support decoding skills, reading fluency, and literacy development in English (Abdullateef, 2023; Cifre & Coblijn, 2025; Yeung et al., 2023). This indicates that systematic literacy intervention continues to play a significant role within ESL instruction for learners experiencing language-processing difficulties.

This result also highlights the need to distinguish targeted literacy instruction from broader inclusive learning design. While structured decoding and reading practices address specific literacy processes, approaches such as UDL and multimodal scaffolding aim to reduce barriers to participation across different learner profiles. These strategies may complement one another, but the reviewed studies do not provide a single comparative measure demonstrating that one approach is more effective than the others.

Although appearing less frequently, Collaborative and Participatory Learning approaches also demonstrated relevance within inclusive ESL contexts. Team teaching, inquiry-based learning, and arts-based pedagogy were used to encourage learner interaction, shared participation, and communicative engagement within classroom activities (Van Hoven, 2025; Karaer et al., 2024). These approaches reflected broader efforts to position learners with disabilities as active participants rather than passive recipients of instructional accommodation.

In the present review, the contribution of collaborative pedagogy is better interpreted in terms of opportunities for interaction, classroom participation, and access to learning activities than as conclusive evidence of language proficiency gains.

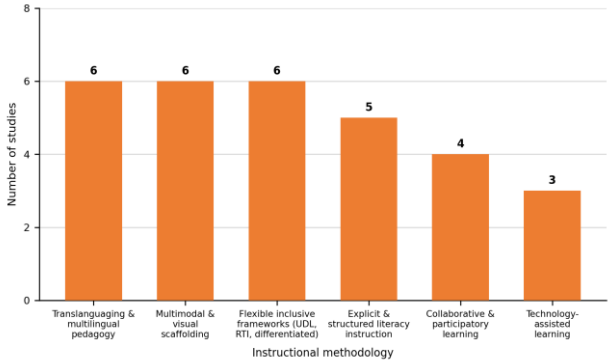
Finally, Technology-Enhanced Instruction represented the least frequent higher-order theme, appearing in 3 studies. The reviewed literature primarily discussed digital learning tools, AI-assisted writing support, and emerging technologies such as ChatGPT as mechanisms for supporting learner autonomy and written communication (Papanastasiou et al., 2026). However, despite their potential benefits, several studies emphasized that technological effectiveness remains dependent on accessibility-sensitive implementation and equitable digital design practices.

This relatively low frequency should not be interpreted as evidence that digital approaches are less useful. Instead, it may reflect the narrow number of studies meeting the review criteria and the recent development of AI-assisted educational applications. Paglialunga and Melogno (2025) reported uniformly positive outcomes across 11 studies of AI-based interventions for students with learning disabilities, yet none was rated at low risk of bias, which calls for cautious interpretation. Consequently, technology should be evaluated in relation to learners' needs, accessibility, and demonstrated educational outcomes rather than technological novelty alone.

The reviewed studies also revealed several instructional methodologies that were frequently reported as effective in facilitating English language acquisition among learners with disabilities. As illustrated in Figure 6, Translanguaging and Multilingual Pedagogy, Multimodal and Visual Scaffolding, and Flexible Inclusive Frameworks (UDL, RTI, and differentiated instruction) were the most frequently reported approaches, each appearing in 6 studies. Explicit and Structured Literacy Instruction followed with 5 studies, Collaborative and Participatory Learning with 4, and Technology-Assisted Learning with 3.

Figure 6

Most Frequently Reported Effective Methodologies in ESL Research (2022–2026)



A recurring pattern across the reviewed literature was the emphasis on communicative flexibility and linguistic inclusivity. In this regard, translanguaging and multilingual pedagogies were repeatedly reported as supporting learners' comprehension, participation, and communicative confidence. Rather than restricting students to English-only instruction, these approaches encouraged the integration of sign languages, home languages, gestures, written text, and multimodal communication systems during classroom interaction (Böhringer & Storbeck, 2025; Padía et al., 2024; Qin, 2025). Across the studies, translanguaging functioned not only as a linguistic strategy but also as a mechanism for reducing exclusion and validating learners' multilingual identities within ESL environments.

Closely connected to this finding was the widespread use of multimodal and visual scaffolding strategies. Several studies reported that visual aids, captioned materials, recorded lectures, AAC systems, and multimedia resources enhanced accessibility and learner engagement, particularly for students with sensory, cognitive, and literacy-related barriers (Chidlow et al., 2025; Barrera Ciurana & Moliner García, 2025). By reducing reliance on purely auditory or text-heavy instruction, these approaches enabled learners to access English input through multiple communicative channels, thereby fostering more inclusive participation in classroom interaction.

The importance of accessibility-oriented instruction was further reflected in the frequent implementation of UDL and other flexible inclusive frameworks. Studies employing differentiated instruction, RTI, and UDL consistently emphasized the need to accommodate learner variability from the beginning of instructional design rather than through retroactive accommodation practices (Brandt, 2024). Within ESL contexts, these frameworks commonly involved multiple forms of representation, engagement, and expression that allowed learners with disabilities to participate according to their communicative strengths and learning preferences.

While the previously discussed methodologies focused broadly on accessibility and participation, another group of studies highlighted the continuing importance of explicit and structured literacy instruction, particularly for learners with dyslexia and reading-related disabilities. Phonics instruction, repeated reading activities, scaffolded writing support, and systematic decoding exercises were frequently associated with improvements in reading

fluency, vocabulary recognition, and language comprehension (Abdullateef, 2023; Cifre & Coblijn, 2025; Yeung et al., 2023). These findings indicate that structured literacy support remains particularly relevant in ESL contexts where English orthography and phonological complexity may intensify language-processing difficulties.

In addition to these pedagogical approaches, several recent studies also explored the role of technology-assisted learning in supporting learners with disabilities' English acquisition. Although appearing less frequently than other methodologies, AI-assisted writing tools, digital platforms, and adaptive technologies were reported to show promising outcomes in promoting learner autonomy and facilitating written communication (Papanastasiou et al., 2026). Nevertheless, some studies cautioned that technological effectiveness remains highly dependent on accessibility-sensitive design and the extent to which digital systems avoid reproducing ableist assumptions or communicative barriers (Foley & Melese, 2025; Y. Huang, 2026).

Taken together, the pedagogical themes show a common emphasis on reducing barriers to learning, but they represent different forms of support. Translanguaging expands access to linguistic resources, multimodal approaches diversify the presentation and expression of meaning, explicit literacy instruction addresses particular reading processes, and flexible frameworks guide instructional planning. Importantly, the frequency with which an approach appears in the reviewed articles does not independently establish its comparative effectiveness. Stronger conclusions about learning outcomes would require comparable intervention measures, longer-term evaluation, and studies involving less-represented disability groups and educational settings (Lynch et al., 2026; Paglialunga & Melogno, 2025).

Conclusion

This systematic literature review synthesized 14 studies published between 2022 and 2026 to examine the demographic representation of learners with disabilities in ESL research and the instructional methodologies most frequently reported as effective for English language acquisition. The review revealed that learners with literacy-related disabilities remained the most frequently represented population, whereas autistic learners (four studies) and learners who are deaf or hard of hearing, have physical disabilities, or carry intersectional

labels (two studies each) were less frequently represented. Geographically, the literature was concentrated primarily in the United States and selected Asian and European contexts, with higher education emerging as the dominant educational setting. Ultimately, the findings indicate a gradual shift in contemporary ESL scholarship from deficit-oriented perspectives toward more inclusive, multilingual, and accessibility-centered approaches to language learning.

Pedagogically, translanguaging practices, multimodal scaffolding, flexible inclusive frameworks, and structured literacy instruction were the most frequently reported approaches. These methodologies collectively emphasized communicative flexibility, learner participation, and accessibility rather than remediation-centered instruction alone, suggesting that effective ESL pedagogy depends on the extent to which learning environments accommodate diverse linguistic, sensory, and communicative needs. By synthesizing these findings, this review offers critical contributions to educational policymakers, curriculum designers, and researchers; it offers evidence-informed directions for reforming language teacher preparation programs and designing equitable ESL curricula that dismantle ableist institutional barriers.

Nevertheless, this review acknowledges several methodological limitations, including its relatively small corpus of studies and its focus on ESL literature published between 2022 and 2026. Because the included studies were not compared on a common outcome measure and the review reports how often approaches appeared rather than how well they worked, the findings describe the state of the literature rather than the effectiveness of specific methods. The study is further constrained by potential search bias from the selected keywords, the limitation of drawing from only four specific academic databases, and the inherent risk of subjective interpretation during qualitative screening and thematic synthesis. To address these gaps, future research should expand representation across underexplored regions, diverse disability groups, and educational contexts while continuing to investigate inclusive pedagogical practices that position learners with disabilities as active multilingual participants in English language learning.

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